There are eight observations that really stood out to me, a communication scholar of over 40 years, in watching President Trump’s State of the Union address on Tuesday.

First, President Trump began speaking prematurely, forgetting to allow Speaker Nancy Pelosi officially to introduce him — a ritual performed prior to almost all State of the Union speeches. Inadvertent oversight or calculated move? If intentional, this could be read as slap in the face to the woman who thus far has effectively called the president’s bluff and frustrated him. If accidental, which is understandable, then perhaps the time has come to permanently eliminate this redundant ritual for introducing the president.

Second, from a rhetorical as opposed to purely partisan perspective, it was noteworthy that early in the address President Trump advanced a potentially persuasive argument and it was not applauded by those in the room. Following a grocery list of all the alleged economic progress made since his election in 2016, Trump threatened Congress by declaring that the only things standing in the way of continued progress and peace are: “foolish wars, politics or ridiculous partisan investigations.” For Americans tired of political stalemate and weary of the ongoing Russia investigation that does not directly and concretely impact their lives, this last bit may resonate.

Third, framing caravans and illegal immigration as an economic issue facing the nation, as the president did initially, may seem more palpable to some than prior racist comments by Trump on this issue. Unfortunately, the president then returned to his usual unproductive fear mongering and less than truthful rhetoric about border security — claims that continue to be proven false and misleading by independent fact checkers.
Fourth, an extremely powerful moment in the speech — that will be discussed widely in the days to come — occurred when President Trump directly turned and spoke to female members in the House, applauding the record number of new jobs for American women. Members of the House immediately seized the opportunity by preemptively cheering and catching Trump off guard; the president then went off script to celebrate all the new women in Congress — something he may not have planned to do.

Nevertheless, the spontaneity of Trump’s ad lib congratulations appeared sincere to many, while admittedly ironic if not awkward and embarrassing to others. What is noteworthy, however, is that this segment of the speech resulted in one of the few times when there was a bipartisan standing ovation accompanied by chants of “USA” — especially done enthusiastically by female Representatives dressed in white sitting on the Democrat side of the aisle.

Fifth, claiming that had he not become President the United States we now would be at war with North Korea not only was inaccurate, but fell flat with Republicans in attendance. The silence was obvious.

Sixth, declaring we will never be a socialist nation, though oversimplified and misleading, clearly foreshadowed what will be one of Trump’s potentially effective rhetorical appeals in the 2020 campaign, regardless of his Democrat opponent.

Seventh, the conclusion of the speech was well-crafted and more in tune with previous State of the Union addresses, eloquently articulating the challenge to unite and move beyond our differences.

Finally, visual images and nonverbal communication played an enormous role in Tuesday’s State of the Union. The best example of this is a photo of Speaker Pelosi clapping sarcastically to the president’s face that immediately went viral and was described by The Washington Post and others as “condescending.”

Overall, President Trump delivered two separate, arguably contradictory, speeches: one to the base, full of red meat, xenophobic and untruthful claims and one to the rest of America, grounded in a seemingly persuasive call for compromise and an appeal to avoid revenge. It is easy to see why Trump opponents were and will continue to be appalled by the sharp contrast between the president’s words and deeds. It is also obvious why Trump supporters, especially his base, will view this as a successful speech. As CNN’s Van Jones bluntly put it, the speech contained both “cookies and poop.”

Will the president’s remarks make a difference and move the political needle? As with prior State of the Union speeches, probably not. On balance, the speech will be well received in the short term but likely will fade, especially if Trump can’t follow through on the promise of unity and continues to behave and tweet as he has since becoming president.

Cherwitz is the Ernest S. Sharpe Centennial Professor in the Moody College of Communication and Founder of the Intellectual Entrepreneurship Consortium (IE), University of Texas at Austin—a nationally acclaimed cross-disciplinary initiative.

Publications include two books and over one hundred journal articles, chapters, and reviews. Taking rhetoric beyond disciplinary boundaries, Cherwitz is a frequent contributor to professional associations and educational organizations, exploring issues pertaining to academic engagement and public
scholarship—all documenting the capacity of rhetoric to transform higher education and forge academic-community collaborations.

Cherwitz received three of the National Communication Association's top awards given to scholars in communication: the Karl R. Wallace Memorial Award, the Douglas Ehninger Distinguished Rhetorical Scholar Award, and the Donald H. Ecroyd Award for Outstanding Teaching.